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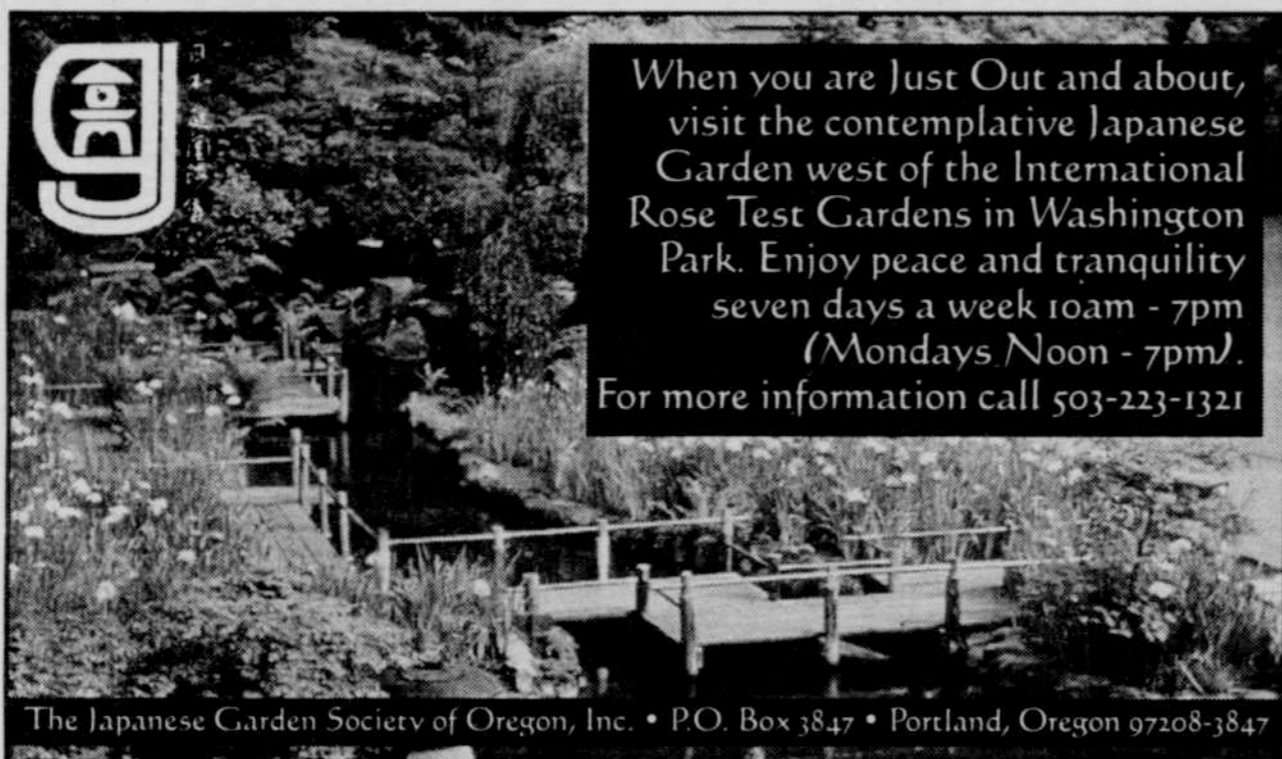
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CULTURE

Bigger isn't always better

Health concerns for big-boned gals

BY PAULA MARTINAC

One great thing about the lesbian community is it is generally accepting of many different female body shapes and sizes. Women large and small usually can find sex and love in dykedom. But even though lesbians' positive approach to weight and body image is admirable, our community should be discussing health-related questions about "women of size."

Fat is a feminist issue, to use the phrase Susie Orbach coined in her groundbreaking 1978 book. It's rare to meet a woman who hasn't been negatively affected by body image at some point in her life. Many girls and women literally have starved themselves, developing health-endangering eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia in order to match the Ally McBeal archetype that the media like to portray and that straight men supposedly prefer.

Gay men, too, have been adversely affected by body image, often enduring cultural pressure to conform to a standardized, sculpted image of male beauty.

Lesbians, however, don't have to care about visually pleasing men. As a result, we can dress comfortably, wear our hair short even if long hair is fashionable and refuse to conform to a socially prescribed image of beauty.

Indeed, many of us never would dream of pairing the words "weight" and "problem." That freedom can be empowering.

Moreover, dykes have been at the forefront of the fight against size oppression. That doesn't mean simply demanding roomier seats in public accommodations or large-size paper gowns in doctors' offices.

Studies suggest overweight people often face workplace discrimination in hiring and promotions. Fat, some employers think, automatically means lazy and sloppy.

In recent years, lesbians of size have been getting more organized against weight-based discrimination. A handful of zines and other publications are geared to larger lesbians, and this month the National Organization for Lesbians of Size, or NOLOSE, will sponsor its annual conference in Parsippany, N.J. It probably will be an inspiring event for its attendees, with hundreds of big-boned gals gathered in one spot, literally throwing their weight around.

At the same time, however, the lesbian community faces serious health-related questions that don't appear to be a major focus of the conference even though many of these issues affect women of size. A study published last spring in the *American Journal of Public Health* found a larger percentage of lesbians are obese than women in general. The researchers suggested that being so much less

concerned about weight actually might work against lesbians, placing us at risk for diseases that could have a relationship to obesity, such as heart disease.

Another such disease is adult-onset diabetes. About 85 percent of Type II diabetics are overweight when they receive their diagnoses.

The disease is spreading at an alarming rate in the United States. Late last year, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released statistics indicating diagnosed cases of diabetes increased by one-third during the 1990s. Although Type II used to strike primarily middle-aged people, it increasingly is affecting younger adults in their 20s and 30s.

Diabetes is an insidious disease. You won't die of it, just as you won't die of AIDS; rather, the complications are what'll kill you.

My father, who has lived with Type II diabetes for more than 20 years, has faced a host of these complications, including heart disease, plummeting white blood cell counts, circulatory problems and partial blindness. A doctor of mine—who, by the way, is rated a "fat-friendly physician" by anti-discrimination groups—

advised me that the best way to avoid developing diabetes is to exercise, eat well and not gain weight.

Given what we know about the connections between obesity and disease, it worries me that assertions of "fat is beautiful" by some lesbians might backfire on our community. The truth is, endorsing obesity as a beautiful way of life is problematic.

Lesbians need to take weight issues much more seriously than we do, but unfortunately, being critical of obesity remains taboo. The silence around lesbian obesity reminds me of the hesitancy in the gay male community to speak up against bareback sex; in both cases, there's fear that raising concerns will inhibit people's freedom of personal expression.

How could lesbians address the issue of weight? Research suggests diets are pretty useless, because people often gain back whatever weight they've lost.

Interestingly, some studies indicate it's better to be overweight and exercise regularly than to be slender and a couch potato. It would be life-affirming if the community took up the challenge of preventive health and found ways to sponsor workshops such as low-impact aerobics (the NOLOSE conference had one last year) specifically geared to the physical needs of lesbians of size. [E]

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